

The Standard Bearer

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Good tidings of great joy

Rev. John Marcus

Herman Witsius: Still relevant (3)

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The instrumental cause of our salvation (2)

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Meditation

Rev. John Marcus, a minister of the Word in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Good tidings of great joy

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

Luke 2:10-11

Good tidings of great joy!

The world looks for joy in possessions and pleasures and power and whatever else they set their hearts on. Their idols promise happiness; but they never deliver. And when one's idols prove themselves empty—as idols invariably do—they are replaced with other idols equally unable to satisfy.

In contrast to the empty joy of the world, there is great joy for all who know salvation in Christ the Lord. The shepherds experienced that joy some two thousand years ago.

The good tidings of great joy came to poor shepherds on the outskirts of the humble town of Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary, having found no room in Bethlehem's inn, ended up in a stable on the edge of civilization, in which stable Jesus was born. Though He was the King of kings, Jesus was born far away from any royal palace, in a place fit for animals. Instead of velvet or fine linen, He was wrapped in strips of cloth. Instead of a luxurious bed, He was laid in a feeding trough. Christ's lowly birth in Bethlehem, to our human eyes, does not seem like the most joyful of circumstances.

Fitting those lowly circumstances, the news of the King's birth was not delivered by courier to the kings and princes of the world. God did not send angels to the high and mighty of the world. He chose to send the news of Christ's lowly birth to humble shepherds dwelling with their sheep, even farther from civilization than the stable. Shepherding was the lowliest of occupations. Watching the flocks at night time was even more undesirable. But God chose to send good tidings to shepherds, whom most would consider to be least deserving to receive such tidings. God's grace works that way.

The words of the angel were, "I bring you good tidings!" Tidings, not just that a baby was born, as people

might rejoice in the birth of any child, but tidings of salvation. Exactly because the angel brought the good news of the gospel, he tells the shepherds, "Fear not."

Why must they and why must we not fear? Because a "Savior is born, which is Christ the Lord." The good news is not merely that a Savior would one day be born in the future. The good news is that the Savior *has been* born, the very Seed God had promised since the Fall of Adam and Eve. Just as God promised, Christ was born in the line of David, in Bethlehem, the city of David.

Our Savior did not come merely to save from physical oppression as, for example, the Jews were experiencing at the hands of the Romans. The Savior did not come merely to save us from hunger, disease, poverty, wars, drug addiction, low self-esteem, depression, injustice, racism, or any host of societal ills. To be sure, our final salvation will include deliverance from these things.

But our Savior gives us much more than that. His salvation is not only deliverance from the effects of sin as we experience them in the world; it is also deliverance from sin itself and the eternal torments that our sins deserve. The Savior not only delivers us from the greatest evil; He also confers upon us the greatest good—He brings us into covenant fellowship with the Father.

The Savior born that day was fully human, being born of a woman. And yet, He was much more than a man: the Savior is "Christ the Lord." He is the *Christ*, that is to say, the Anointed one, ordained and equipped to save us. And, He is God *the Lord*, having all power and authority to save His people to the uttermost. Jesus' lowly birth cannot be separated from His exalted rule. Even the wise men, who later visited Jesus, understood that He was King at His birth. The mystery of Bethlehem is that the Infinite took on finite form; the Almighty God took upon Himself weak human flesh; the Eternal bound Himself up in time.

These good tidings give us every reason for great joy because they answer to our deepest need.

That great need is brought out by the fact that the

shepherds were “sore afraid.” When they saw the dazzling glory of the Lord shining round about them, the shepherds were not unlike Isaiah when he saw the glory of the LORD emanating from the throne of God. Seeing that glory, Isaiah cried out, “Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Is. 6:5). When the shepherds saw the glory of the Lord shining round about, they feared what might happen to them because they knew they were sinful creatures of the dust who deserved God’s wrath.

In response, the angel says to them, “Fear not!” The same word applies to us when we consider the glorious righteousness of God and our despicable sinfulness. God says to us in the gospel, “Fear not!” Why? Because of the good tidings of great joy.

The world may manifest a certain kind of joy. They might laugh at jokes and rejoice at their temporary and insignificant possessions and accomplishments. They might have companions who gladly join them in their worldly pursuits. But the world seeks its joy apart from God in the superficial things here below. And, when they have to answer God on the judgment day, their superficial joy will turn into deep-seated and dreadful fear.

Thanks be to God, we have reason for great joy this season as we contemplate the glorious truth that our Savior was born with a special purpose. He was born in order to purchase our salvation with His precious blood. He was born to deliver us from our greatest misery and make us His own precious possession as adopted brothers and sisters. When we understand just a portion of our glorious salvation, we rejoice. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ! We know God’s Fatherly love as we stand in Christ! What greater reason for joy could there be in the entire world?

Every child of God faces sorrows of one sort or another in this valley of tears. We experience sorrows in our families and marriages, loneliness, difficult work circumstances, grief over the loss of loved ones, guilt for past sin. But, God’s word to us is, “Fear not! A Savior is born!” We are loved by God for Christ’s sake. That gives us perspective no matter what darkness we face. Not that this joy erases the very real sorrows we experience. But joy runs deeper than our sorrows!

This joy is the personal, subjective experience of God’s children. Not that we experience that joy in its fullness at every moment, but we do have this joy because the Savior came for us personally. The angel’s

announcement to the shepherds was not merely, “A Savior is born,” a Savior who might be the Savior of others but not necessarily their own personal Savior. Rather, the angel says, “*Unto you* is born this day...a Savior.”

This announcement was first made unto the shepherds. Although the text does not say specifically that these shepherds were men of faith, we know they were from their response to the good tidings. When the angels left, these men delighted in the glorious message and made haste to visit the Christ child lying in a manger in order to worship Him.

Of course, the words “unto you” announced by the angel were meant not only for the shepherds who first heard them; they are meant for all believers. That is why the angel says these good tidings of great joy “shall be to *all people*.”

However, these good tidings are not joy for every person that has ever existed. These tidings were not a source of joy for wicked Herod when he came to learn of Jesus’ birth. Nor are they a source of great joy to the wicked reprobate in general. Literally, the angel says that good tidings “shall be to all *the* people.” This joy is for a specific group of people. There is joy for the whole nation of God’s people; these good tidings are for all of true Israel who were looking for God to send the Redeemer. “All the people” includes people from every nation, tribe, and tongue elected by God from before the foundation of the world. Great joy shall be to all God’s people because that little baby lying in a humble manger would one day be humbled unto death as He was nailed to the rugged cross.

Great joy is given to us today by the Spirit of Christ, who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. As the Spirit gives us life and shows us our need of a Redeemer, He also gives us eyes of faith to see that the Son of God humbled Himself and took on human flesh to suffer hell’s torments in our place. There is great joy knowing that our faithful covenant God loved us before the foundation of the world, that He manifested His love in the sending of His only begotten Son, and that He acted upon His love and took us into fellowship with Himself. That same God will never leave us nor forsake us, and will one day take us into glory.

What good tidings of great joy to consider this season!

May the good tidings of Christ’s birth and death, and now His reign in heaven, give us joy in this season and every day of our pilgrimage.



Editorial

Rev. Kenneth Koole, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Herman Witsius: Still relevant (3)

We come to the heart of the antinomian controversy in England in the late 1600s, that which was most ‘warmly’ disputed among the Protestant theologians and in their congregations, namely, “the utility of holiness,” as Witsius labels it.¹ This is simply another way of referring to good works and their place in the life and salvation of the redeemed: their benefit, their usefulness, their incentive, and even in what sense they are necessary.

It was an area of dispute (one that has always retained that potential) because of what Rome made of good works, namely, *meritorious works*. A whole misbegotten theology was constructed on their performance, one that corrupted the gospel, which is to say, salvation by grace alone by the power of God alone, and justification based on Christ’s atoning work alone.

Grace itself is redefined as grace *earned*, which is no grace at all.

In reaction to Rome’s corruption of the gospel, and the pivotal truth of the gospel, namely, justification by faith alone without works, Reformed men have always been cautious about what value good works have. We refer to such things as their profit, their benefit, and their motivation; lest works, once again, come to occupy an improper place in the preaching; lest grace be displaced by works, and faith in Christ’s work alone becomes, for all intents and purposes, a faith in one’s own works along with Christ’s.

For many the fear of replacing salvation by grace and faith in Christ with salvation by works and faith in self is so great that there arises suspicion by reflex when mention is made of good works as being necessary and having a vital value in the life of the believer in any real sense at all. If one does speak of their ‘necessity,’ it is only to be in the sense of good

works being the necessary fruit (which is to say, the inevitable fruit) of being saved and an expression of gratitude. Surely, for preaching to speak of the necessity of and motivation for good works in any other sense will bring us back to the bondage of Rome. It will be a blow against salvation being all of God and by grace and grace alone.

And so, out of fear of what Rome has done with the doctrine of good works (and, later, what conditional covenant views have done), there arises a desire, and even resolve, to mute calling the saved with urgency to live a life of holiness; that is, if that holiness is defined in terms of doing what God’s precepts require, namely, performing deeds of godliness (good works) and in terms of those deeds being motivated, in part, by their being of benefit to one’s relationship to God, as well as to others.

As a result, in the name of misguided piety, an antinomian spirit shows itself. Preaching of the whole counsel of God is truncated. A host of scriptural phrases, if stated with emphasis in the preaching, are viewed with suspicion, in particular those calling for sanctifying one’s life and to which are attached either threats or promises. Does not such preaching imply that God’s dealings with His people now somehow depends on their works? Where is the “it’s all of grace”?

Accordingly, grace defined in terms of salvation being contrary to all one’s deserving receives all the emphasis. As if this alone magnifies salvation by grace alone. But efficacious grace (which is to say the work of the Holy Spirit) which/who transforms a man and makes him a new creature with renewed spiritual abilities enabling one to walk in the ways of righteousness (uprightness) is minimized, and even dismissed. And preaching that pointedly reminds one of that grace and what it means for a man and how one ought to be living if one is a Christian indeed is criticized and, in some instances, even condemned.

This happened in England in the days of Witsius. And parallels can be found throughout the history of Protestantism to this present day.

Coming at last (in Chap. XV) to the place of good works (that is, the life of holiness) in the life of the be-

¹ *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions, on the Controversies Agitated in Britain, under the Unhappy Names of Antinomians and Neonomians*, T. Bell, transl. (Glasgow: W. Lang, 1807). First published 1696 in Latin in Utrecht. All references in parentheses are to this work and edition. Roman numerals refer to chapters, regular numerals to pages. Unless otherwise noted, italicized words are Witsius’ for emphasis.

liever, Witsius in the following propositions lays out what some in England were promoting, and what he considered to be an antinomian perspective:

With respect to the *utility of holiness and good works*, I find the following things disputed; whether it [can] be justly said,

1. That good works are of no profit to us, in order to *the possession* of salvation; so, that though they are acknowledged not to be *the cause of reigning*, they cannot be reckoned even the way to the kingdom: that whatever good we do, we do it *not for ourselves*, but for Christ: that nothing is to be done *that we may live*, but [only] *because we do live*.
2. That it is unlawful to do any good with the intention, *that by doing it we may promote our own salvation*.
3. That there is no duty of virtue or holiness, however perfectly performed, whereby *we can gain even the least good to ourselves*, either in this life, or in that which is to come. For that no evil or hurt can be *avoided* by so doing, neither can peace of conscience, nor joy in the Holy Ghost, nor assurance of the remission of sins, nor consolation be promoted in this way.
4. That the exercise of holiness and good works is not to be reckoned *a proper* and even *a sufficient evidence* and argument, that we are in a state of grace, and in the certain expectation of glory.
5. That even the *sincere holiness of believers*, [though] proceeding from the Spirit of grace, is in its exercise, *filthiness and dung* before God; and that consequently he who studies holiness with all the diligence he can, is *not a whit more pleasing* and acceptable to God, than if he *neglected it*, or indulged himself in vice (pp. 152-53).

In the first proposition, Witsius refers to the *possession* of salvation. He is not talking about the *right to possess* salvation in all its aspects, about which, as he stated previously, all agree. It is all earned by Christ. Rather, Witsius is referring to the personal aspect of one's salvation as it is one's own possession, having to do with the newness of life with its joys, activities, and experiences.

To this life of salvation, the antinomian maintained, the life of good works is of no profit (of no benefit).

The antinomians pointed out, works cannot be the cause for Christ's grace reigning (ruling) in us. That is simply according to God's predestinating will.

And that is certainly true.

But now the question: Does that mean, therefore, that good works may not even be considered to be the way *to* the kingdom. By this Witsius refers not to the way *into* the Kingdom, but rather to the way of life if one will enjoy the life of one's salvation and be on the

path that leads to glory.² Such language was opposed by some. The preaching must not leave the impression in any sense that we live in holiness and godliness so that we *may live*, but simply because we *do live* (that is, have spiritual life, which, therefore, must and will inevitably show itself).

This sentiment is closely connected with the second and third propositions.

In the second proposition the contention was, since we are to be Christ-centered in all that we do, surely it would be unlawful (improper and unbiblical) to urge upon the believer the life of godliness (of good works) because in some sense, this life of good works serves one's own salvation. Surely, this would be too self-serving and not Christ-centered enough.

The third proposition states that these same men insisted that no virtue of holiness could gain (be profitable for) even the least good (benefit) to oneself either in time or for eternity. This in turn implies that preaching must not then teach or leave the impression that the life of uprightness has any vital value when it comes to peace of conscience, joy in Spirit, or assurance of forgiveness. After all, even our best works are naught but "filth and dung"?

So it was argued.

The fourth and fifth propositions are, I think, clear enough as they stand.

Witsius in honest, objective fashion sets forth what it is that motivates those of the doctrinal antinomian persuasion. We quote some representative selections:

...they put us to mind [remind us], that in all these [above] assertions, the only end they propose is, that the glory of free justification may remain entire to God and Christ, and that no justifying virtue may be attributed to our works of whatsoever kind...(XV, p. 154).

...[And] Christ is the only way to life; the practice of godliness is the necessary labour and occupation of those who walk in this way. Further, we do no good for ourselves, since all things requisite to salvation, were abundantly performed for us by Christ...(pp. 154-55).

...[W]hat do our works avail to peace of conscience and joy in Christ? Which, if we attend to their imperfection, and the pollution wherewith they are defied, proclaim nothing but war; the blood of Christ only proclaimeth peace, which you see in vain elsewhere...(p. 156).

Such was the perspective of those of an antinomian bent, their justification for opposing how many Protestant clergy were preaching the importance, value, and vital necessity of good works in the life of the child of

² That this is Witsius' meaning is spelled out in the next chapter, as we will see—pp. 162-63.

God. They were doing so to protect the “glory of free justification” and “Christ as the only way of life.”

Witsius’ response is found in Chapter XV, entitled “The Doctrine of Scripture concerning the Utility of Holiness.” In his introductory summary he sets forth what he is convinced is the scriptural and Reformed view of the place of good works for the redeemed (the life of godliness in the life of the child of God); their importance, value, benefit, and even their necessity, which things all serve as the proper incentive for resolving to live unto God, and then doing so. What Witsius is implying is, these things are to be preached so that the child of God fully understands why he *must* live that way if he is to walk in fellowship with his God.

Witsius’ first proposition sums up his evaluation of the antinomian propositions dealt with in the previous chapter (in XIV, as listed above). He begins by declaring, “The interest of religion is ill consulted by such rugged phrases [as proposed by those of an antinomian perspective].”

Witsius’ statement stands as an indictment of where antinomian sentiments inevitably lead. And it is not to true religion, or if you will, to true piety, but to its diminishing.

Witsius then proceeds to set forth what he is convinced is the Reformed perspective:

II. In the matter itself [the controversy set before us] some things are to be approved, others not. III. Scripture teaches that something must be done that we may be saved. IV. That holiness is the way to life. V. That it is not inconsistent that we live to Christ, and consult our own advantage. VI. That we must do good because we live, and that we may live. VII. That it is good and holy, that in the study of good works we have a regard also to our own salvation. VIII. Provided that love to ourselves be properly subordinate to the love of God. IX. That godliness is profitable to all things. X. That by it impending calamities are avoided, and peace of conscience and joy promoted. XI. Some seem unjustly to deny that sanctification is an evidence of justification.... XIV. Assurance of election arises from a consciousness of Christian virtues. XV. By them it is demonstrated whether one be in the faith and in Christ.... XIX. The holiness of believers, though imperfect, is pleasing to God for Christ’s sake. XX. Nay also, inasmuch as it is true holiness, for its own sake. XXI. Whence it is, that by how much one is more holy, by so much he is the more acceptable to God (XV, p. 159).

Due to space, we cannot in this article give select quotes of Witsius explanation of these propositions. We will let the reader reflect upon what Witsius wrote above and consider how orthodox one finds these statements to be, how Reformed, how scripturally sound. In

light of previous exchanges in this magazine, the third proposition might raise some eyebrows. But we will let Witsius speak for himself.

However, before we conclude, we do well to give Witsius’ explanation of what is listed as proposition “II.” above. Writes Witsius,

In the matter itself, there is that [which] I approve, and what I disapprove. I approve indeed, of the scope [the intention] of all this doctrine; which has this for its object, that men may be called off from all presumption upon their own righteousness, and trained up to the exercise of genuine piety, which flows from the pure fountain of Divine love. But I do not equally approve... to take from good works all that fruit and utility, so frequently assigned them in scripture. Free justification is so to be consulted, that nothing be derogated from the benefit of sanctification. And as the oracles of the Divine Spirit which speak of the former [namely, of free justification—kk], are to be explained according to their utmost emphasis, lest the merits of Christ alone be any how diminished; so those which treat of the latter [namely, the benefits of sanctification], are not to be extenuated by unnatural interpretations. We must accurately distinguish between a right to life, and the possession of life [!]. The former must so be assigned to the obedience of Christ, that all the value of our holiness may be entirely excluded. But certainly our works, or rather these, which the Spirit of Christ worketh in us, and by us, contribute something to the latter. And here again, the excessive rigidity of disputation is inconsistent with the moderation and mildness of the scriptures. Which I shall show distinctly and in order (XV, pp. 161-62).

Take note of the sentence that reads, “We must accurately distinguish between a right to life, and the possession of life.” This takes us to the heart of the dispute. Men drift in the direction of an antinomianism exactly because they fail to distinguish between what grants the *right* to life, and what has to do with the possession (the enjoyment and benefits) of that newness of life.

Witsius, in chapter XVI, makes that plain. As we shall see next issue, D.V.



All around us

Rev. Nathan Decker, pastor of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan

Endorsement of homosexuality and same-sex marriage in the sphere of the church

In a previous installment for the “All Around Us” rubric (Feb. 1, 2020, p. 204), I considered the progression of sexual immorality in the sphere of the world by focusing on three current developments: the real push to legalize prostitution, the increasingly common polyamorous relationship, and the direction of the pornography industry in utilizing virtual reality technology. The sexual revolution of the twenty-first century has been swift and deep. For the believer who desires and watches for the return of Jesus Christ, these advancements in the realm of sexual immorality come with no surprise. The cup of iniquity must fill up. The world is becoming riper for judgment in its rebellion against God and truth.

So too in the sphere of the church. And for the sober Christian who knows well the truth of II Thessalonians 2, to observe the departure from truth and godliness in the realm of the church is that which is expected, for the day of the Lord’s return shall not come “except there come a falling away first” (II Thess. 2:3). It is, however, seen with sadness, particularly when that departure is found in churches and institutions to which one traces their roots and heritage. It is with the deepest humility and the earnest prayer that the Lord would preserve His people in these last and evil days that we reflect upon these same developments in the realm of the church. We turn our attention now to three recent events, all of which are bound together by the common thread of acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

The first event comes out of the Neland Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Earlier this summer, the Council of Neland CRC ordained as a deacon a woman currently in a same-sex marriage. That a woman would be ordained into one of the special offices of Christ in a Christian Reformed Church is not newsworthy in 2020. Long ago the CRC opened the special offices to women. But that a woman in a same-sex marriage would be ordained into office is noteworthy, for this reflects to a further departure from God’s truth on both fronts, the special offices in the church and the institution of marriage.

The president of the Neland council said the follow-

ing in explanation of this decision: “Neland was given the gift of LGBTQ+ members with whom we worshipped, members with clear gifts of ministry and leadership, members we loved. We simply worked slowly and prayerfully over the past 10 years to find ways to encourage rather than ignore their gifts.”¹ Take note: the very argument used to support the ordination of women is now being employed in the service of the ordination of practicing and married homosexuals, namely, the presence of ministry and leadership gifts.

What I found particularly striking is the commentary on the decision of Neland CRC in this same article, revealing the polarizing nature of her ordination. While some strongly supported, others objected and even left the congregation. One such dissenter was a former female deacon in the congregation. This was her response: “I don’t think that all of a sudden after 2,000 years of scriptural interpretation things have suddenly changed. I think that unfortunately our church is following cultural norms and listening to the ways of the world. What we are asked to be is counter cultural. How are we showing God’s love by condoning a sin?”² What she says about the ordination of a woman in a same-sex marriage could be said concerning the ordination of women into office. Both are contrary to two millennia of historic biblical interpretation. Both are a following of cultural norms. Both are the ways of the world brought into the church.

But such is the sad nature of departure. When the standard of who holds the special offices in the church is not the clear Word of God and when homosexual desires and practices are not sharply condemned as sin and rebellion against God, the inevitable and unsurprising fruit is this: the ordination of a woman in a same-sex marriage.

The second event, recorded in *The Chimes*, comes out of Calvin University, the institution of higher education with which Neland CRC is affiliated. A student

¹ <https://www.thebanner.org/news/2020/09/woman-in-same-sex-marriage-installed-as-deacon>.

² [thebanner.org/news/2020/09](https://www.thebanner.org/news/2020/09).

named Claire Murashima penned an article concerning herself. The title of the article and its associated image tell the whole story. The headline: “I am Calvin University’s first openly gay student body president.” The picture: the author kissing another woman with a rainbow flag draped over their shoulders.

Although the title and image speak volumes, a few quotations provide a flavor of the article’s tone and content.

Reflecting on her legacy because of how she identifies herself:

But my legacy will invariably be different, because I am Calvin University’s first openly LGBTQ student body president. I’m bisexual. I’ve also questioned if I was a lesbian in the past. Usually I use the term ‘queer’ because it encompasses all of these identities. One thing’s for sure: I am not straight.³

Setting forth her purpose and vision:

I’m sharing my story with the community because I take the weight of representation seriously, I have a desire to lead Calvin and the CRC into the future and want their queer students to see themselves in my story. I’d feel as if I’d made a mistake as student body president if I did not use my platform to do so.⁴

Commenting on life at Calvin:

Calvin’s heteronormative and relationship-focused culture can leave us feeling excluded. Furthermore, we don’t see ourselves represented in Calvin’s administrators or professors. Not seeing anyone who loves like us makes us feel like we don’t fully belong at Calvin. When the demographics of our university’s administrators and professors doesn’t match the diversity of our world, we are not reflecting the Kingdom of God.⁵

Before we move on to consider the third event, we reflect briefly upon the question: why is it good to be aware of this development on the campus of Calvin University? Many answers could be given to this question. I offer only two.

First, being aware of these specific developments equips leaders and parents to teach the youth of the church what they will encounter upon entering the world of higher education. The youth must know what they will face in life on the campuses, be ready to give an answer in defense of the truth, and be prepared to count the cost of doing so, namely, ridicule. This preparation requires understanding the issues and prayerfully seeking the Lord’s wisdom in knowing how to engage in the defense of the truth with humility and in conviction. I hope that an article such as this one would stimulate discussion to that end.

3 <https://calvinchimes.org/2020/10/16/i-am-calvin-universitys-first-openly-gay-student-body-president>.

4 calvinchimes.org/2020/10/16.

5 calvinchimes.org/2020/10/16.

Second, we are reminded of the great need that a Claire Murashima has, namely, the true gospel of Jesus Christ. While the institution and denomination as a whole may continue down the path of departure from the Reformed faith and historic biblical Christianity, the Lord may be pleased to deliver individuals from that apostasy and ungodliness, and that through the humble, and faithful, and bold witness of our youth. And so may the church equip our youth boldly to defend the truth on college campuses, sharply condemn error and ungodliness, all the while earnestly seeking the salvation of their fellow university students who may be walking in darkness. May the Lord give us faithfulness in our defense of the truth and in our personal witnessing of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For our third event, we broaden our perspective and consider news coming out of The Vatican. Pope Francis has recently caused quite a stir by words that he spoke for an interview in a recently released documentary on his life and work called “Francesco.” His comments concerned same-sex marriage. I quote in full the controversial words: “Homosexual people have the right to be in a family. They are children of God. You can’t kick someone out of a family, nor make their life miserable for this. What we have to have is a civil union law; that way they are legally covered. I stood up for that.”⁶

Pope Francis’ words contradict official Roman Catholic teaching, which condemns same-sex marriage. However, they do not constitute an official change of the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, they are in keeping with his liberalizing tendencies. He had already in the past revealed himself sympathetic to the LGBTQ movement, saying in 2013 about a gay priest “Who am I to judge?” In addition, he has received a transgender man in the Vatican and met with a same-sex couple in Washington, D.C. His latest words, however, are most explicit and controversial on the subject of same-sex marriage and certainly make clear the path down which he desires the Roman Catholic Church to go concerning homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

“Swift and deep”: those were the words used in the introduction to describe the progression of sexual immorality in the sphere of the world. Sadly, as the above demonstrates, the same applies to the sphere of the church. The way has been and continues to be paved for the coming antichristian kingdom in which the beast from the sea will unite with the beast from the earth in opposition to Christ and the church. Have no fear, beloved Christian. But hope, being certain of the victory that is ours in Jesus Christ.

6 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pope-francis-backs-civil-unions-for-gay-couples-in-shift-for-vatican>.



Search the Scriptures

Rev. Ronald Hanko, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Jonah's flight

But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof and went down into it to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah 1:3

Having received his commission, Jonah immediately repudiated it by fleeing the land of Israel and going not to Nineveh but to Joppa, where he took passage on a ship bound for Tarshish. Joppa is on the coast of Israel, a seaport now known as Jaffa. Peter would later do mission work there and it was in Joppa that he received his vision of the unclean animals (Acts 9, 10). No one really knows where Tarshish is, though it is mentioned over twenty times in the Old Testament. The guesses range from the city of Tartessos in southern Spain, to Tarsus, Paul's home city, in southeast Asia Minor. Its location is not important, however. What is important is that Jonah was fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

Did Jonah really think he could escape the Lord's presence? Surely, as a prophet of God in Israel he would have known of God's omnipresence. David speaks of it in Psalm 139:7-12, and Jonah could not have been ignorant of it: "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me" (vv. 9-10). If nothing else, God's reference to Nineveh and its wickedness would have shown Jonah that God was there and, if there, then everywhere.

That question is answered by the reference to the "presence" of the Lord in Jonah 1:3 and by the use of the name Jehovah there. The word "presence" is often translated "face" in the Old Testament and is most often used to refer to God's revelation of Himself to Israel. He showed them His face and they lived before His face as His covenant people. The use of the name "Jehovah" is confirmation. In the Old Testament, it was in Israel exclusively that God revealed Himself, and there He revealed Himself as the God of His people, Jehovah, their covenant God.

When Cain went out from God's presence (Gen. 4:16), he had not escaped God's omnipresent power and judgments, but he had left the fellowship of family and

of God's people, the sacrifices and worship of God, and the word of God to his father, Adam. When God said to Moses, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest" (Ex. 33:14), He was not suggesting any possibility that He was not the everywhere-present God of the desert as well as of Mount Sinai, but promising that He, revealing Himself as the God of His people, their covenant God, would be with them through the difficult years of the wilderness wanderings.

Jonah's flight from the presence of the Lord was not, then, a denial of God's omnipresence but an attempt to escape the word of the Lord to him, a word that God usually gave only in Israel. Foolishly, he thought that God's word would not follow him to Tarshish, discovering to his dismay that not only is God omnipresent, but also that His word is not bound (II Tim. 2:9), not in any respect.

Jonah's flight should not seem a strange thing to us. Church members do the same thing today when they abandon the church because they are uncomfortable with the message and demands of the gospel. Sitting under the preaching and knowing themselves to be hypocrites, they find their hypocrisy uncovered by the Word of God. Living sinfully, they cannot bear the Word's demands for holiness. Wanting to go their own way, they flee the Word of the Lord that holds before them the right way.

Sometimes we do this by putting our Bibles aside and by praying only formally, thus doing our best to avoid the Word of the Lord and even God Himself. Guilty of lying, we do not want to read of Ananias and Sapphira. Guilty of sexual sin, we do not care for the story of David's adultery and his confession in Psalms 32 and 51. Experiencing marital problems, we avoid reading Proverbs 5:18, 19 and Ephesians 5:22-33. Living in hatred and bitterness, the Word of God in Hebrews 12:15 is something we would rather not have brought to our attention.

I am Jonah when I move away from home to escape the admonitions of my parents and shut myself off from my family when they disapprove of the way I live. I am Jonah when I do not answer my phone, recognizing that

it is the elders or the minister calling about my poor church attendance. I am Jonah when I walk away from my marriage because I do not want to obey the Word of God concerning my marital responsibilities. Disobedience is always fleeing from God. Fleeing, if God does not intervene, brings us far away from Him and from His Word, all the way to Tarshish.

Whatever the Word of the Lord calls us to do—to believe, to repent, to obey—in whatever circumstances He calls us—church, family, work, personal life—it makes demands that we do not like and sometimes avoid if we can. When that happens, we are acting as Jonah did, especially when we close our ears to that call, flee that Word as we hear in the church, or shut the covers of the written Word.

The ungodly do this by their unbelief. They attempt, as Jonah did, to escape God's call by turning their back on the grace and lovingkindness of God: "They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy" (Jonah 2:8). They do the same when they attempt to destroy God's Word and the church by every means at their disposal, including persecution. Revelation 11 gives a powerful picture of their efforts in the silencing of the two witnesses. Like them, we walk in Jonah's disobedient footsteps when we close our ears and hearts to the call of God. We find ourselves, then, fleeing to Tarshish.

We make many excuses for such behavior, and Jonah would continue to make them even after he witnessed Nineveh's repentance: "And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil" (4:2). We excuse ourselves by saying, "I just want to be happy," as though true happiness is somehow to be found in sin. We excuse ourselves by pointing out the faults and sins of those who admonish us for disobedience and sin and by becoming bitter against them. How very much like Jonah we are!

We have seen that Jonah fled out of jealousy for apostate Israel as well as out of hatred for Nineveh, Israel's archenemy. This, too, was a failure to understand that obedience to God's command, as wrong as it seemed, was good not only for Jonah but for the Israel he loved and served as prophet. His going to Nineveh was God's mercy to Israel—God was provoking Israel to jealousy by sending Jonah to Nineveh, doing the same thing He would do when He took away all privileges from unbelieving Israel and sent the gospel to the Gentiles in the New Testament.

Not all would be provoked. For carnal Israel, those who would not repent and believe, Jonah's going to Nineveh was a warning that God would take every-

thing away from them and give it to those, who like the Ninevites, were no people. Nevertheless, there was always that precious remnant, the remnant according to the election of grace that had to be saved by any means, and Jonah's trip to Nineveh would be used by God to wake them to repentance and faith.

Paul understood better than Jonah when he wrote, "For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them. For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" (Rom. 11:13-15). As apostle to the Gentiles he, a Jew, went to the Gentiles in obedience to God's command. He went in the confidence that God would use his preaching among the Gentiles to provoke and save some of his beloved kinfolk, those for whom he would rather be accursed than see them perish.

Jonah disobeyed, distrusting the Word of the Lord and God's promised mercy to Israel, as though God could or would forsake and cast off His people whom He foreknew (Rom. 11:1). We show the same distrust when in disobedience to God's revealed will we go our own way, not believing that obedience, difficult as it may be, is the only way of blessing, peace, happiness, and eternal life, both for ourselves and for those who are close to us.

God's Word and God's call are the way of salvation, whether it be the powerful and secret call of the Spirit in our hearts, the call of the gospel to faith and repentance, the call to live obediently in whatever place we have, or the call to serve God in a particular way. We may not set it aside, turn our backs to it, or refuse to heed it. We must obey, and if we find obedience difficult, we must find the courage and willingness to obey in God's all-sufficient grace: "My whole hope is in thy exceeding great mercy and that alone. Give what thou commandest and command what thou wilt" (Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10, Chap. 29).

God's presence is fullness of joy (Ps. 16:11). It is no wonder then that Jonah confesses that those who follow lying vanities forsake their own mercies (Jonah 2:8). How foolish, but how inclined we are to do as he did. May God and His grace keep us from going to Tarshish and fleeing from the presence of the Lord. May He teach us, as He alone is able, the joy and blessedness of walking before His face in righteousness.



I believe

Rev. Cory Griess, pastor of the First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan

The instrumental cause of our salvation (2)

Previous article in this series: November 15, 2020, p. 93.

Introduction

Last time we saw that Calvin spoke of four “causes” of salvation. The first was the *efficient* cause, which Calvin said points to the Author of salvation, the triune God of grace. The second was the *material* cause, describing the substance of our salvation, Christ and His righteousness. Next, Calvin spoke of the *instrumental* cause of our salvation, describing faith, the pipeline or instrument God uses to grant us all the salvation that is ours in Christ. Finally, Calvin referred to the *final* cause of our salvation, which describes the end or goal of salvation, namely, the glory of God.

Works out of place

When we hear of good works having a place and function out of harmony with the Reformed confessions, we tend to see a red blinking light going off over the *material* cause of salvation. And it is good we have that instinct. Generally, the error that puts good works in a wrong place is the one that adds good works to Christ’s righteousness as the *ground* or *material* cause of salvation. If our works (done before or after regeneration) become part of that ground, we are not saved on the basis of the righteousness of Christ alone.

The purpose of *this article*, however, is to show that there is an error that not only adds works to the *material* cause of our salvation but also to the *instrumental* cause of our salvation. That is, there is an error that combines faith and the works that faith produces, and makes these *together* the pipeline through which we receive salvation from Christ. If this error is being made, we ought to see a red blinking light over the *instrumental* cause of our salvation.

Rome’s error

When the Reformers battled for the recovery of the gospel, they not only had to do so facing Rome’s error regarding the *material* cause of salvation but also facing Rome’s error regarding the *instrumental* cause

of salvation. The Roman Catholic Church not only taught (and still teaches) that our works are part of the ground or *material* of our salvation, but it also taught (and still teaches) that our good works are part of the *instrumental* cause of our salvation. Rome used the language of the four causes to teach its errant doctrine of salvation.¹ At the Council of Trent, therefore, where Rome tried to combat the Protestant teaching that we are saved *by faith alone*, Rome declared, “Of this Justification the causes are these...*the instrumental cause* is the sacrament of baptism....”² Baptism! Rome said baptism is the instrument or pipeline through which justification comes, which baptism consists of faith and works according to Rome.

But more, since a baptized person can still commit the kind of sin (mortal sin) that cancels out the justification one receives through baptism, Rome taught (and still teaches) *penance* is necessary as a “second plank” to justification. That is, penance is a second instrumental cause that restores justification to someone who lost it: “Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesiastical communion. It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification.”³ And, according to Rome herself, that penance includes faith *and* works: “Penance is a sacrament of the New Law instituted by Christ in which forgiveness of sins committed after baptism is granted through the priest’s absolution to those who with true sorrow confess their sins *and promise to sat-*

1 This is part of the reason the Reformers used this language in their teaching.

2 *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Accessed November 13, 2020. <https://catholicism.org/the-causes-of-justification.html> (emphasis added).

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1992), 363.

isfy for the same.”⁴ In Roman Catholic teaching, the instrumental cause of our salvation is not faith *alone*.

The Federal Vision’s error

When the Federal Vision (FV) put forward its corruption of Reformed theology, that really was Roman Catholic theology re-imaged. The problems FV had (and has) include that it makes the good works of faith part of the *instrumental cause* of salvation. Especially, FV teaches this with regard to our final salvation at the judgment day. Rich Lusk is representative: “Works of faith-filled obedience...are the means through which we come into possession of eternal life.” And again, “They [good works produced by true faith] are not merely evidential, but even causal or instrumental in our final salvation.”⁵ Guy Prentiss Waters comments, “Lusk has spoken of faith-produced works as ‘causes’ or ‘means’ of our salvation.” “Lusk’s formulations are vulnerable to the charge of...denying the uniquely receptive office of faith in justification.”⁶ The danger in both Roman Catholic and FV theology is not only, then, that it makes faith-filled works part of the *material cause* of one’s salvation, but also that it makes faith-filled works part of the *instrumental cause* of salvation.

Sola fide

When the Reformers set forth the biblical doctrine of faith alone as the instrumental cause of salvation, they made clear that, though faith goes on to produce many works and indeed *must* do so in order to be deemed true faith,⁷ those works are no part of faith when it is functioning as the instrumental cause of our salvation. In fact, they went so far as to say, when faith is functioning as the instrumental cause, it does not even include *love*.

Luther, commenting on Galatians 3:12, wrote,

Paul saith: “the law is not of faith.” But what is the law? Is it not also a commandment touching charity, as we may see by the text: “thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy soul, etc.” (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37)... If the law then that commandeth charity be contrary to faith, it must needs follow, that charity is not of faith.... Now the law being separate and set apart, charity is also set apart, with all that belongeth to the law, and

faith only is left, which justifieth and quickeneth to everlasting life.⁸

Calvin, commenting on Galatians 5:6, says, “If the faith which justifies us be that ‘which worketh by love,’ then faith alone does not justify.”⁹ Galatians 5:6 is the passage to which Rome constantly referred to teach that our works are part of the instrumental cause of justification. The verse reads, “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.” The FV, too, repeatedly refers to this passage to say that the works of faith are part of the instrumental cause of our salvation (especially our final salvation at the end). Calvin agreed with Luther, that while faith has love, and goes on in love to produce works of love (the meaning of Gal. 5:6) even faith’s love is not with it when faith is functioning as the instrumental cause of justification.

Geerhardus Vos, following the Reformed tradition, asks and answers a significant question in this regard: “Does the essence of faith then consist in love for the Mediator?” If love is of the *essence* of faith, and love is commanded by the law, then faith can never be distinguished from works. If faith cannot be distinguished from works, then not faith alone but faith plus its works are together the instrumental cause of salvation.

To maintain this would bring us into Roman Catholic terrain, because, as has already been noted, for Rome love is seen as the “form” of faith—that is, love is what gives faith its distinguishing character.... There is evidently a difference in principle between believing and loving. It is true that saving trust in the Mediator may not be conceived of without it being accompanied by love for Him. But this does not at all prove that faith and love must be regarded as identical. The difference is this: that love is an act by which I devote myself to the beloved object, while faith, conversely, resides in an appropriation of the object of faith for myself. In faith I seek for myself a certainty on which I can live before God, and so in faith there is always an element of personal interest. In love, on the other hand, I am not inquiring after such a personal interest.... Out of the personal relationship of faith...love naturally develops.¹⁰

Vos is saying faith and love are distinguishable. Even though they are not separated, they are distinguishable. Thus faith, apart from its love, may be and is the sole instrumental cause of salvation.

...to be continued.

4 *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Accessed November 13, 2020. <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/penance> (emphasis added).

5 Quoted in Guy Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2006), 89.

6 Waters, *Federal Vision*, 89, 90.

7 Probably the most striking in Calvin on this are his comments on Ezekiel 18:14-17.

8 Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1999), 159.

9 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 152.

10 Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol 4: Soteriology* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015), 130-31.



God's wondrous works

Rev. James Laning, pastor of Hull Protestant Reformed Church in Hull, Iowa

The Trinity of Persons in one God

When you think about the fellowship we have with God, do you also think of the fellowship that God has within Himself? The covenant communion we have with God is related to the communion of the three Persons in the triune God. It is the God who has fellowship within Himself that brings His people into fellowship with Him.

After a few articles on God's covenant, we turn now to consider the doctrine of the Trinity and our fellowship with our covenant God. By His grace we have everlasting communion with God, the living God, the God who is three Persons in one Being.

Brief overview

The doctrine of the Trinity can be stated concisely, yet is beyond our full comprehension. By the Trinity we mean that there is only one divine Being and that in that divine Being there are three distinct Persons. In the Belgic Confession we confess: "We believe in one only God, who is one single essence, in which are three persons" (Art. 8). One Being or essence in which are three Persons. That is what is meant by the Trinity.

It is, of course, one thing to say that and another to understand what we are saying. What, for example, is the difference between essence and person? In the first few centuries after Christ, God's people spent many years and had much discussion on this very subject.

The saints knew there was only one God and that Jesus Himself was God. The problem was, if Jesus is God and the Father is God, in what sense are they different? They are one God, but two what? And how about the Holy Spirit? The saints knew that the Spirit also is God. So if the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all one God, in what sense are they three? They are one what and three what? After a considerable amount of debate, the church adopted the wording we confess today: They are three *Persons* in one *essence*.

That there is one *essence* of God is a bit easier to understand. The word *essence* comes from a verb that means *to be*. God's essence, therefore, refers to who God is. When we talk about God as the Almighty God or the eternal God we are talking about God's essence.

The unity of God's essence is expressed in the Athanasian Creed. The first and somewhat lengthy section of this confession is on the Trinity. Speaking about the one essence, there are a number of statements like this: "The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal." And: "So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty. And yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty."

When we refer to God as eternal or almighty (or His other attributes), we are talking about His essence. This is who God is. He is eternal. He is almighty. These are what we often call attributes or perfections of His essence.

That there are three *Persons* in God means that in the one Almighty there are three individuals: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We often say a person is one who says "I." A person is the subject of one's actions. That there are three Persons in God means that there are three that say "I" in the one God.

Already in Genesis 1 we read of a plurality of Persons in God. In more than one place we read of God speaking to Himself and saying "us": "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). "And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Gen. 3:22a). When God speaks to us, He says "I..."; but here, when He speaks to Himself, He says "us."

This means there is communion within God. That would not be the case if there was only one Person. But there are three. God is one single essence in which are three Persons.

"We believe in one only God, who is one single essence, in which are three persons" (Belgic Confession, Art. 8).

Antichristian denial of the Trinity

That there are three Persons in God means that the Son and the Holy Spirit are both Persons and that they are both God. That means that one who denies the deity of Christ or the deity of the Holy Spirit denies the Trinity.

Regarding the former, Scripture says that a denial of the deity of Christ, and thus a denial of the Trinity, is characteristic of the spirit of antichrist. When we think of what Scripture says the antichrist will do, it is important to remember that the spirit of antichrist denies the Trinity.

We read of this in I John 2:22, which speaks of antichrist denying the Father and the Son: “Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father” (I John 2:22-23a).

A second passage speaks of the denial that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh: “And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world” (I John 4:3).

This second passage speaks of those who deny that Jesus Christ “is come” in the flesh. Jesus was certainly born. But this text says that He “came.” That Jesus “came” means that, before He was conceived and born, He was with the Father. This text, therefore, is proof that Jesus is very God. The Word was with the Father, and, while continuing to be God, He came in the flesh. Or, to put it another way, Jesus’ conception and birth was an act of His own. He willingly took upon Himself the human nature.

The spirit of antichrist denies this. The fact that both these passages speak of antichrist tells us that we should expect a denial of the deity of Christ, and thus a denial of the Trinity, to become more common in the last days.

Some subjects to consider

Having set forth a brief overview of the doctrine of the Trinity, the plan in future articles is to consider certain aspects of this doctrine in more detail. The intention will be not only to explain some Scripture references to this doctrine but also to apply this doctrine to our own experience.

It is interesting and perhaps easy to overlook that our Belgic Confession makes a specific reference to our experience when explaining the doctrine of the Trinity.

That there are three Persons in God means that there are three that say “I” in the one God.

The ninth article of the Belgic Confession gives proof from Scripture that there is a trinity of Persons in the one God. The first sentence of that article also makes a specific reference to our experience: “All this we know, as well from the testimonies of Holy Writ as from their operations, and chiefly by those we feel in ourselves.” What does this sentence mean, and what does this have to do with our communing with the triune God? Lord willing, we will take a look at that.

It will be good to investigate what Scripture and our confessions say about both the oneness of God and the threeness of God. That God is one means that there is only one God and that He is a simple, spiritual Being. It

may seem as though there is not much to say about the fact that there is only one God. But when we look to Scripture, it is interesting to note 1) what God points out as proof that He alone

is God, and 2) how He has made this known very clearly to us, His covenant people.

Regarding the threeness of God, we will look at what our creeds refer to as the “incommunicable properties” of each of the three Persons. We will also consider a couple of errors regarding God’s threeness that were taught in the past and are still being taught today. There is the error known as modalism, which teaches that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three Persons but three modes in which the one divine person has manifested Himself. Secondly, there is the error of subordinationism, which teaches that within God the Son and the Holy Spirit are subordinate. In our own day this latter error is being promoted by some evangelicals.

It will also be important to consider how God guided the church to confess this truth in the early creeds. Fundamental doctrines concerning the Person and natures of Christ and concerning the deity, personality, and double procession of the Spirit were gradually expressed officially in creedal form. Lord willing, we will consider how the Spirit of Christ guided the church to do this.

It is with joy in our hearts that we meditate on what God tells us about Himself and what He has done for us. The triune God has fellowship within Himself and has brought us into communion with Him. What a joy to have covenant fellowship with the triune God! May we praise Him for His mercy, and walk humbly with Him, showing our gratitude to Him for the covenant blessings He has bestowed on us and all His people.



Strength of youth

Rev. Joshua Engelsma, pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in Doon, Iowa

Churchman

Previous article in this series: September 1, 2020, p. 472.

Churchman—although not entirely unheard of, it's not a word that we use very often. It refers to a man of the church, a man whose whole life revolves around the church, a man who dedicates himself to the service of the church.

The church today needs churchmen. Her need is not simply for members who are male, but for male members who are truly men, that is, strong men of God.

Especially is this need urgent in the evil days in which we presently live. The church throughout history has always needed strong men, but that need is all the more pressing as wickedness and chaos reigns in the wicked world and as apostasy becomes more prevalent in the church world. Living in such a world, the church cries, "God, give us young men who will be churchmen!"

By considering in this article the church's need for godly men, we bring to a conclusion our series on biblical manhood. Undoubtedly, more could be said about the subject, but I have tried to keep a narrow focus on those areas of life that particularly apply to young men. And the last main area is the place of men in the church.

Serving in special office

God has given to men the unique calling to serve in the special offices in the church: the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon. *Only* men may serve in these offices; women are prohibited from doing so.¹

The position that only male members may serve as officebearers is a controversial one. There are many churches today—including *Reformed* churches—who allow women to serve as deacons, elders, and pastors. The idea that women are not allowed to hold these offices is considered old-fashioned and discriminatory.

This position is, however, the "position" of God Himself as expressed in His timeless, inerrant Word. When Jesus appointed apostles in the church, He appointed men. When the first deacons were ordained (Acts 6:1-

6), the church appointed men. When the inspired apostle laid out the qualifications for officebearers (I Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:6-9), he made it clear that only men were to be chosen: "...the husband of one wife..." (v. 2).

Two passages make this prohibition explicit. In I Corinthians 14:34, 35 we read, "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husband at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church." And I Timothy 2:11, 12 say, "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence."

The reason God prohibits women from holding special office in the church is that He created the woman *after* the man, *out of* the man, and *for* the man (I Cor. 11:8, 9; I Tim. 2:13, 14). God placed the man in the position of being head of the woman and gave to him the authority to lead and rule. This principle applied to the church means that only men may serve in the official offices of authority and leadership in the church.

To say that women may not serve in the special offices does not mean that women have no place of service in the church or that the place they have is unimportant. Women do have a place in the church. An important and necessary place! Far from putting women down as insignificant, the Word of God lifts women up and extols their important place in the church.

The place of women in the church is to teach. No, not to teach in an official capacity, but still to teach. If God is pleased to give them a husband and children, they have the important calling of teaching their children. "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing..." (I Tim. 2:15; cf. also I Tim. 5:14; Tit. 2:4, 5). With or without children, women also are called to teach one another. Especially does God lay before the older women the calling to help teach and guide the younger women (cf. Tit. 2:3, 4).

Women also have an important place in the church in nurturing the relationships among the church members. Generally speaking, women are much more relational

¹ For a fuller explanation of this subject, cf. the pamphlet by Ronald Cammenga, "Women in Church Office," published by the Evangelism Committee of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church (available at prca.org, under "Resources, pamphlets").

than men and are much more adept at building and strengthening relationships. Just as, practically speaking, a mother is the glue that holds a family together, so women are the glue that holds the church together. In a thousand, small, oft-unnoticed ways, they nurture the life of the congregation by serving the other members, bearing the burdens of the struggling, rejoicing with those who rejoice, and grieving with those who grieve. The thought of a church without the service of women is too frightening even to consider!

As important as the place of women is, only men may serve in the special offices in the church. Although most of the young men reading this may not yet be serving in a special office, nevertheless, there are important things for you to consider.

In the first place, you ought to desire to serve in special office some day. I Timothy 3:1 says, “This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of bishop [elder], he desireth a good work.”

Be careful not to misunderstand. It is possible for a young man to desire special office in an unholy way. He might want to be an officebearer out of a sinful desire for honor and the praise of men. Or he might want to be an officebearer out of a lust for power and being in charge of others. Or he might want to be an officebearer out of a proud attitude that he is more gifted, more knowledgeable, more Reformed than the other men in the congregation. This can lead to bitterness when such a man is not chosen for office. He becomes bitter toward the church and critical of men who were chosen instead of him. Beware, young men, that you not desire special office out of pride or self-seeking!

That being said, there is a holy, Spirit-wrought desire for special office. This desire arises in a man’s heart because he loves Christ, loves the church of Christ, and desires humbly to serve the church. Young men, pray for and cultivate this holy desire for special office!

In the second place, young men ought to prepare themselves to serve in special office some day, if the Lord wills. If and when the Lord calls, be prepared to meet that call.

The most important preparation is not profound and does not come through some specialized training. That preparation is a grateful life of sincere godliness. Reading the list of qualifications laid out in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1, one cannot help but be struck by the fact that it is describing the blameless, pious life that every Christian man is called to live. Young men can prepare themselves for special office by being men of God’s Word, men of prayer, and men who strive to walk uprightly before God.

Young men can also prepare themselves for special office by taking a lively interest in the church. Again, this is nothing profound, but ought to be the case with

every Christian man. Know what is going on in your own congregation. Take an interest in the denomination more broadly and in the church of Christ catholic. Keep up with what is going on in the lives of the members of your congregation, and seek opportunities to serve and to minister to the needs of others. God’s people trust men who show that they care for the saints, and will be ready to entrust such men with leadership in the church.

Finally, there is a place for young men to prepare themselves through study. Familiarize yourselves with the confessions, become acquainted with the Church Order, read books and articles on the work of elders and deacons, and watch carefully how respected men conduct themselves in these offices.

Because of wickedness in the world or troubles in the church or the busyness of life, men might not want to serve in special office. But the church needs you! She needs wise, compassionate, courageous men to lead and protect her! Therefore, prepare to serve!

Serving as a church member

Although only men may serve in special office, not all men will serve as officebearers. Whether due to a lack of qualification in a man, or an abundance of qualified men in a congregation, or various other circumstances, some men may never be called to a special office. This does not mean, however, that they are unimportant and unnecessary. The church needs men to serve in special office, but she also needs the service of all the men in the office of believer.

Male members need to be aware of two things about church membership. The first is that we need the church more than the church needs us. We men are tempted to think of ourselves as being strong and independent, but the truth is that we are weak and dependent upon the church and the other members of the church. We need the church, the means of grace that are found there, and the support and care of our fellow saints.

The other thing that we need to keep in mind is that we are called to a place of service in the church. We may not take the attitude of consumerism into the church, the idea that church is mainly about what I am getting out of it rather than what I am giving. Our focus rather ought to be on giving to others and seeking to serve them (cf. Q&A 55 of the Heidelberg Catechism). The other members of the church need the leadership and service of the men of the church.

Practically speaking, this means that the life of young men ought to be structured around the church. Our membership in the church ought to be top priority. The church needs us to be active and involved.

Although we might not be officebearers, we ought

to cultivate with our officebearers a healthy relationship of mutual trust and respect. We ought to support and encourage our officebearers, and even humbly correct them if the need arises, as they labor to protect the church in her doctrine and life.

Young men also ought to become aware of and cultivate the unique gifts that God has given to them (cf. Rom. 12:3-8; I Cor. 12; Eph. 4:7-16). God has graciously bestowed upon us gifts to use in His service, and as a reflection of His infinite majesty He has bestowed different gifts in different measures to different men. Seek to know the gifts that God has given you to use in the church, and ask other wise men and women to help you know your gifts if you are struggling to determine what they are.

Then, look for any opportunity to use your specific gifts in the service of the church. Keep alert for any needs that might arise, and offer to meet those needs. There are all kinds of opportunities to serve in the church, if only we would open our eyes to see them. The following is just a small sampling of the different ways that men are needed in the church: ushering, parking vehicles for the elderly, running the sound system for worship services, serving on a church committee (for

example, evangelism committee, building committee), leading (or simply participating in) a Bible study group, helping organize fundraisers and activities, visiting widows and widowers and those in nursing homes.

As we search out ways to serve in the church, remember: there is no place of service too small or unnoticed for us, no place of service that is beneath us. As Jesus washed His disciples' feet, so we must be ready to wash the feet of our fellow saints and perform any small, unwanted task in the church.

In conclusion...

Young men, I hope and pray you have been encouraged and challenged by these articles on what it means to be a real man of God. Be men!

Young women, if you have read these articles, I would be delighted. Push your brothers in Christ to be real men, and settle for nothing less.

Parents, continue to instruct your sons in what biblical manhood means. In particular, fathers, model manhood to your boys.

Church of Christ, pray that the King of the church would continue to raise up among us stalwart sons.



Go ye into all the world

Rev. Richard Smit, missionary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, stationed in Manila, Philippines

The three-self formula and PRCA foreign missions (2)

We look now at a selective overview of the history of the embrace and use of the three-self formula in Reformed foreign missions.

The first example is the mission work of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) in its Arcot mission field in India, which began in the 1820s.¹ This date is significant because it pre-dates the influence of Venn, Anderson, Nevius, and Allen in Protestant foreign missions in the late 1800s and early 1900s, which indicates that some sense of the three-self formula already existed among Reformed missionaries and the calling churches at the beginning of their work in southern India.

In a large and thorough history about that RCA mission work in India, Prof. Eugene P. Heideman wrote a

summary of the mindset and goal of the missionaries in the "Preface" of the book.² He wrote that their goal was the development of mission stations into congregations and into a federation of churches. The goal was pursued through many challenges and difficulties, including persecution and famine. In fact, a reader of that extensive history might question whether the mission work always consistently followed the three-self formula. Nevertheless, the goal of a self-governing, a self-propagating, and self-supporting federation of churches was obtained finally in 1947. Consequently, the role of the foreign missionaries changed from a leading position to the position of a supporting role. Later in the book and according to the writings of the missionaries, Heideman concluded that

1 The Arcot mission in India of the RCA under the work of the Scudder missionary brothers began there in 1819. That area includes the familiar city of Vellore.

2 Eugene P. Heideman, *From Mission to Church: The Reformed Church in America Mission to India*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), x.

the “Reformed Church missionaries knew from the very outset that the church in India could not be dependent on the presence of the missionaries permanently. That is why their aim was a self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating church.”³

In this first example, we observe that the development of new churches and a federation, characterized by the three-self formula, required conscious foresight and wisdom by the missionaries.

The second example is the mission work of the Reformed Church in America in Chiapas, Mexico. In a history of the work of an RCA missionary, Rev. John Kempers with his wife, Mabel, in Chiapas, from 1926 to 1965, Dr. Pablo A. Deiros gives the details of the RCA mission labors to develop indigenous churches in Chiapas. Although the indigenous churches were, interestingly, Presbyterian and not Reformed (a fact that raises questions not in the focus of this article), Kempers labored and helped to establish indigenous churches, that is, self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting churches in a regional, federative union of a presbytery.

This commitment to the three-self formula and the respect of the autonomy of the local churches was clear to those among whom missionary “Kemp” (as he was affectionately called) labored. Deiros writes that in 1971 the officebearers and members of the local churches

in Chiapas knew that the Reformed Church missionaries were completely at one with their church. They knew that the heart of their missionaries was to build a strong national church. What was said of one of their missionaries, namely, that ‘he loves the church more than his own life,’ could be said of all of the missionary families; they worked in full agreement with the nationals. From the time that the Presbytery of Chiapas was formed (1949), the [RCA] mission upheld the rule to never have any missionaries start a new work or project without the approval of the presbytery or one of its official committees.⁴

The “strong national church” for which the RCA missionaries labored was not local churches or a presbytery that was part of the RCA denomination. Rather, they sought to establish through preaching and instruction churches and a presbytery that were mature, stable, thriving, faithful, and indigenous churches. These would be churches that possessed capacity for self-government, self-support, and self-propagation.

In light of that desire for a “strong national church,”

the last sentence of the above quote is not an insignificant detail about the working relationship between the RCA missionaries and the local churches and federation in Chiapas. It is evidence that the RCA missionaries understood the application of Reformed principles of church polity in their mission labors, even at the point when they had transitioned into a different role among the national churches in Chiapas. The description of the working relationship, that the RCA missionaries would not start a new work in the region without approval of the national churches, is convincing evidence that the RCA missionaries honored the Christ-given authority of the elders in the local churches and presbytery. They respected them as self-governing churches in the fellowship, and were determined that they would not interfere or attempt to usurp authority by voting or by inserting themselves as officebearers in the local councils or as voting members of the presbytery. Committed to the three-self formula, they submitted to the authority of the elders of the local churches and presbytery and transitioned into a supportive and mentoring role within the locally autonomous churches. Consequently, that commitment of the missionaries won the admiration and confidence of the national churches so that they continued to seek the wisdom, guidance, and assistance of the foreign missionaries beyond 1949.

In this second example, we observe especially that a commitment to the three-self formula by the RCA missionary was a key tool in the development and maintenance of a healthy, ongoing friendship between the new indigenous churches and the foreign missionaries and their sending denomination.

A third example of a commitment to the three-self formula self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting churches, is found in the mission work of the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRC) in the Southwest United States with the Navaho and Zuni tribal nations. In a striking 1946 speech for the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the labors of the CRC among the Navaho and the Zuni, John C. De Korne said that

I hope that there will not even be an Indian mission of the Christian Reformed Church a quarter of a century from now! By that time there should be a strong native church..., and the native leadership can take its rightful place in the maintenance and development of the church of God in the great Southwest.⁵

This statement conveys the conviction that the mis-

³ Heideman, *Mission*, 80.

⁴ Pablo A. Deiros, *KEMP: The Story of John R. and Mabel Kempers, Founders of the Reformed Church in America Mission in Chiapas, Mexico*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), 481-82.

⁵ John C. De Korne, “What Hath God Wrought!” in *Navaho and Zuni for Christ*, Dr. J. C. De Korne, editor (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Board of Missions, 1947), 204.

sion churches in the Southwest, comprised of members of the Zuni and Navaho nations, should be able on their own to self-govern, self-propagate, and self-support their own local churches within the federation family as full sister congregations.

That this was the goal of CRC foreign mission work among in the Southwest U.S. was confirmed again by Dick H. Walters in an article "The Reformed Approach," part of the book *Reformed Evangelism: A Manual on Principles and Methods of Evangelization*. In the section about the necessary covenantal approach to Reformed evangelism and its specific application, he describes in his own words the matter of the three-self formula in missions as it also applies to local evangelism:

8. Seek to work on the Indigenous principle. The word "indigenous" means "native born." It is the principle of the local or native responsibility. Too often we apply this term only in foreign missions, when we speak of the organization of the "indigenous" or native church. It is a good principle. It honors God's own work among those whom He brings into His fold....⁶

The "foreign missions" to which he alludes included the work of the CRC among the Navaho and the Zuni

6 D. H. Walters, "The Reformed Approach" in *Reformed Evangelism: A Manual of Principles and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1948), 81.

in the Southwest U.S.⁷ In foreign missions, the CRC was committed to the goal of native churches whose work of maintaining the threefold marks of a true church and exercising the keys of the kingdom of heaven was fulfilled as a "native responsibility." That commitment was necessary because it honored "God's own work among those whom He brings into His fold." Although that thought was not developed any further, it does imply a connection between the three-self formula and the catholicity of the church. The words "His fold" is a reference to John 10:16 and the "other sheep" of the Good Shepherd. Of course, those "other sheep" are the elect sheep gathered into His sheepfold from many nations, tribes, and languages. Local, visible manifestations of the sheepfold of Christ are indigenous church institutes within their respective nations, tribes, and languages as self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting churches.

In this third example, we observe that the doctrine of the catholicity of the Christ's church was understood as a reason for the establishment of fully-functioning, native American churches, characterized by the three-self formula.

In the next article, we will look at more historical examples from Reformed and Presbyterian foreign missions.

7 Walters, "Reformed Approach," 77.



Church and state

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The Supreme Court exempts religious schools from employment discrimination (2)

In the last installment of this series,¹ we looked at the United States Supreme Court decision in the case of *Bostock v. Clayton County*,² in which the Court ruled that, in addition to other forms of discrimination, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 also prevents discrimination against individuals based on sexual orientation or gender identity. This ruling may have effects on private businesses and religious organizations, as will be discussed below. However, on July 8, 2020, the Supreme

Court handed down another ruling in the case of *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey-Berru*³ which exempts private religious schools from employment discrimination claims. We will first look briefly at the effect of the *Bostock* ruling, and then in more depth at the *Our Lady of Guadalupe* case. The legal ramifications of the *Our Lady of Guadalupe* case are particularly noteworthy for all of our covenantal schools.

The *Bostock* ruling could have many effects on private businesses. Just as a business could previously be

1 "The Supreme Court finds Sexual Orientation and Identity to be Protected Classes (1)," *Standard Bearer*, September 1, 2020.

2 *Bostock v. Clayton County*, 590 U.S. ____ (2020).

3 *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey-Berru*, 591 U.S. ____ (2020)

sued for discriminating on the basis of race, age, religion, national origin or gender, now a business could be sued under federal law for not hiring someone who is homosexual or transgender. While the *Bostock* case involved employment, its interpretation of “sex” under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would arguably extend to all aspects of federal anti-discrimination law, such as rental of housing or other services. If an employer holds religious beliefs and expressed disapproval of a homosexual or transgender lifestyle, an employee holding to that lifestyle might be able to claim constructive discharge due to a “hostile work environment.”

The impact of the ruling may be somewhat limited for some organizations in the employment context from the perspective that many states already had laws that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. However, the fact that the prohibition is now also rooted in federal law could have far-reaching impacts, especially for religious-based businesses or organizations that receive federal funding or that participate in federal programs or contracts. For instance, in order to receive federal funding or participate in federal contracts, organizations often have to certify that they do not have policies that discriminate in ways prohibited by federal law. If an organization has policies prohibiting participation in programs by homosexual or transgender individuals or fails to accommodate those individuals, they may no longer be able to certify compliance with federal anti-discrimination laws. Many institutions such as hospitals and colleges are affiliated with religious organizations, and many of those organizations have religious stances at odds with the anti-discrimination laws as interpreted by the Court in *Bostock*. Many of those same organizations participate in federal programs for funding, scholarships, loans, and grants. Private college dormitories are often considered “housing” for purposes of federal anti-discrimination law. Cases such as those involving discrimination claims against bakers and photographers who have refused to participate in homosexual weddings have previously been brought under state statutes, but now federal claims and prosecution could be brought by federal agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

One might wonder how the *Bostock* decision will affect private religious schools. While some of the effects described above could still apply, the effects on employment matters may be limited by the Supreme Court ruling in the *Our Lady of Guadalupe* case. This case, issued shortly after the Court’s ruling in the *Bostock* case, exempts religious schools from claims of employment discrimination. It should be noted that this case applies not only to discrimination on the basis of sexual

orientation or gender identity but also to all forms of discrimination, whether based on age, gender, medical conditions, or other factors. It is also important to note that this exemption does not necessarily apply to all employees at all religious schools, but instead applies only to employees meeting the “ministerial exception,” which will be explained in greater detail later.

In order to understand this case properly, one needs to understand the legal history behind the ruling. Based on the First Amendment Free Exercise Clause, courts in the U.S. have been very hesitant to interfere with the decisions of churches. The Supreme Court has stated “The First Amendment protects the right of religious institutions ‘to decide for themselves, free from state interference, matters of church government as well as those of faith and doctrine.’”⁴ Courts have, therefore, refused to interfere with actions by churches to expel members or discharge ministers, or other ecclesiastic proceedings. In matters relating to employment, the courts developed the “ministerial exception,” the concept that since ministers teach doctrine, the courts will not intervene in matters relating to their employment. In 2012, in the case of *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEO*,⁵ the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously applied the ministerial exception to a teacher in a religious school who taught religion and held the title of minister. We reviewed that case in an article entitled “Religion and Discrimination in Employment (3)” in the February 1, 2013 *Standard Bearer*. In that article, we argued that, since we expect our teachers to incorporate our religious beliefs into all aspects of the curriculum, all of our teaching positions should come under the ministerial exception, even though we do not refer to them as “ministers.”⁶ The Court in the *Our Lady of Guadalupe* case effectively took that same approach, provided the employee’s job involves certain functions.

The facts of the *Our Lady of Guadalupe* case involved claims by two teachers in Catholic schools who claimed discrimination. One claimed discrimination based on age, the other claimed she was dismissed based on her medical treatment for cancer. The district court in each case granted summary judgment for the schools, finding that the teachers could not maintain a claim under *Hosanna-Tabor*. The Ninth Circuit, however, reversed these rulings, finding that the teachers did not come under the ministerial exception because they did not have sufficient

4 *Kedroff v. Saint Nicholas Cathedral of Russian Orthodox Church in North America*, 344 U.S. 94, 116 (1952).

5 *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC*, 565 U.S. 171 (2012).

6 “Religion and Discrimination in Employment (3),” *Standard Bearer*, February 1, 2013.

“credentials, training, [and] ministerial background.” The Ninth Circuit noted that the teachers did not have the title of “minister” and did not have formal religious training.

The Supreme Court reversed the ruling, stating that the Ninth Circuit had misconstrued the ruling in the *Hosanna-Tabor* case into a rigid set of criteria to be met to qualify for the ministerial exception. Justice Alito stated in the opinion he authored for the majority, “What matters, at bottom, is what an employee does.”⁷ The majority noted that the teachers’ contracts and handbooks required them to give religious instruction, worship with the students, and personally model the faith. The teachers’ performance was evaluated on religious bases. The majority noted the long history of various religious groups in the U.S. using schools to incorporate religious doctrine into the instruction of their children. Justice Clarence Thomas filed a separate concurring opinion in which he emphasized that the courts should defer to religious institutions’ determinations as to whether their employees performed “ministerial” functions. It is interesting to note that the case was decided by a 7-2 majority, with only Justices Sotomayor and the late Justice Ginsburg dissenting.

This ruling can give guidance for our own schools. The Lord gives us means to protect the schools He has provided, and we should avail ourselves of those means whenever possible. First, we insist that our teachers incorporate the doctrines taught in our churches into every subject in the curriculum. While we may understand this, we should still review school policy handbooks and teacher contracts to ensure that they explicitly state this. Policies should also make clear that students also learn by example, and that therefore all staff should demonstrate conformity with our doctrines and beliefs in their daily walk and conversation. Contracts can be simplified by incorporating the terms of the school’s handbook by reference, and then elaborating on the expectations and doctrinal bases more fully in the handbook.

School mission statements should be reviewed to ensure that they make clear that the mission of the school is to teach the religious doctrines held by the constituents of the school. Often the Constitution, By-laws, or policy handbooks of our schools will also refer to doctrinal statements such as the Three Forms of Unity. In reviewing such documents, school boards should also consider adding references to the “Affirmations Regarding Marriage, Sexuality, and Gender Identity” adopted by Synod 2020 and incorporating those and any future such affirmations as well. Such policy language should be broadly worded, as much as possible, to include all school employees. While the “ministerial exception”

becomes more of a stretch for non-teaching staff, one can easily argue that if a school employee openly lives in a way contrary to the school’s teachings, that it is counterproductive for the instruction of students. The Court in *Our Lady* tacitly acknowledged this when they noted that the teachers were required to guide their students to live in accordance with their faith and the teachers themselves were to personally model that faith.

While the *Our Lady of Guadalupe* case provides some protection for religious schools in the employment context, the *Bostock* opinion does still raise some questions for religious organizations in other contexts, such as claims by non-ministerial employees or claims not involving employment. For instance, can a religious school prohibit a transgender individual from using the bathroom of the opposite biological sex? Justice Gorsuch, writing for the majority in *Bostock*, noted that there may be religious protections which apply, but that those simply were not raised in the *Bostock* case. The protections noted include the ministerial exception, the exemption under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act’s for religious employers, and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). After the *Our Lady* opinion, we know the court is willing to extend the protection of the ministerial exception, but it remains to be seen to what extent the Court will apply the protections of the Civil Rights Acts’ religious exemption or the protections of RFRA.

One outstanding question is whether the Internal Revenue Service could revoke the tax-exempt status of religious organizations that discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Arguably, after the *Bostock* opinion, discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is in the same classification as racial discrimination. In the case of *Bob Jones University v. United States*,⁸ the Court ruled that the IRS could revoke the tax-exempt status of a university that claimed a religious basis for discrimination based on race because the government had a “fundamental, overriding interest in eradicating racial discrimination in education,” which outweighed the university’s right to exercise their religious beliefs. The financial effect of loss of tax exemption on our schools would be substantial, because in addition to loss of tax exemption, contributions to the schools would no longer be tax deductible, which would effectively make contributions “cost” far more. As mentioned before, government assistance to schools could also be affected by the ruling. Schools, their constituents, and their supporters should be wary of relying on government funding or tax exempt status, as we cannot allow the doctrinal integrity of our schools to be compromised.

⁷ *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, at 18.

⁸ *Bob Jones University v. United States*, 461 U.S. 574 (1983).



News from our churches

Mr. Perry Van Egdome, member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Doon, Iowa

Trivia question

Have you ever heard of a baby growing two pounds in one night?! Check out the church profile and see what actually happened! More trivia next time.

Minister activities

Rev. C. Spronk (Faith PRC) declined the call from Wingham PRC. From a new trio consisting of Rev. J. Engelsma (Doon, IA), Rev. J. Laning (Hull, IA), and Rev. N. Langerak (Crete, IL), Wingham called Rev. Engelsma. Rev. J. Engelsma (Doon PRC) declined the call from Hudsonville PRC. Hudsonville

then formed the trio of Rev. W. Bruinsma (Pittsburgh PRC), Rev. R. Kleyn (Spokane, WA), and Rev. C. Spronk (Faith PRC) with Rev. Spronk receiving the call on November 12. Cornerstone PRC (Dyer, IN) formed a new trio of Rev. J. Smidstra (First PRC, Holland), Rev. A. Spriensma (PRC home missionary), and Rev. C. Spronk (Faith PRC). From this trio Rev. Spriensma received Cornerstone's call. May God guide these men to make the decision that is in harmony with His will.

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." Ecclesiastes 3:3

Church profile—First PRC of Holland, MI

*Submitted by Don DeJong**

On July 4, 1929, at a Field Day of the Protestant Reformed Churches, Rev. Herman Hoeksema announced, "Last evening a baby was born, weighing nine pounds and showing signs of vigorous growth, for during the night the babe grew two more pounds." He was referring to the organization of the First Protestant Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan.

On July 3, members of the Classical Committee had met with interested people for the purpose of organizing a new Protestant Reformed Church. It was thought that as many as 75 families might be interested in forming this new congregation. However, only nine families appeared. Rev. H. Hoeksema preached from II Timothy 2:19: "Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his." And, "Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity." Rev. George Ophoff presided for the organization. Two elders and two deacons were installed into office. The next day, two families added their names to the little group. Thus eleven families were constituted as the "First Protestant Reformed Church of Holland."

The birth of the congregation was soon followed by a severe economic depression. Poverty became the rule of the day, and the little flock was hard pressed to meet their bills. They met for the first five years in a little bakery shop that smelled like bread. The members often left the worship service with flour on their clothing. The first pastor (Rev. Martin Gritters, 1932) used a bicycle to get around town. If he needed to go



Members made this banner for our 75th anniversary. It hangs in our narthex as a reminder of God's great faithfulness to us.

farther out, he had standing permission to use a member's car and he knew where the keys were kept. By 1938, the congregation had grown to 29 families and built their own building. In 1947, their third pastor accepted a call to become "home missionary" for the denomination. Concern for mission work would later be seen in many of our pastors.

In December 1947, Rev. Bernard Kok became Holland's fourth pastor. During his pastorate our denomination was caught up in the major controversy and "split" regarding conditions in the covenant of God. Rev. Kok led the majority of the congregation out of the denomination in 1953, taking the property with them. One member recalls "When the split did occur, we found that those who were faithful to support the truth of the unconditional covenant were in the minority. We were without a pastor, a church building, and all but one consistory member. I recall our first meeting in the Federal School building as we looked about to see which members were present." In October 1953, a consistory was reconstituted out of that small nucleus and the First Protestant Reformed Church of Holland continued to exist. The small group struggled along: "We used a variety of store fronts for worship services. Things weren't that plush, but we did the best we could...." The *PRC Acts of Synod* show that the congregation dropped from 54 families in 1952 to 16 families in 1954.

On February 18, 1965, a new sanctuary was dedicated to the service of the Lord! "This was a great joy...to finally have our own building in which to worship. The entire congregation pitched in to help paint and furnish the church and we took turns with the custodial work." "Our new church seated around 150. We had only about 80 members at that time."

Rev. J. A. Heys was our undershepherd from April 1967 until his emeritation in 1980. During this time he was often sent to the mission field in Jamaica as well as to New Zealand to labor on behalf of the churches. In the years following, many of the pastors of the congregation accepted calls connected to mission work. Rev. R. Miersma accepted a call in

1987 to serve a sister church in New Zealand. Rev. W. Bruinsma came from the mission field in Jamaica in 1989. In 1992, with over 50 families, the church began looking to relocate and purchased land. The current sanctuary was dedicated in 1998. The following years saw two more pastors head for mission fields. In 2009, Rev. D. Kleyn accepted a call to labor in the Philippines, and Rev. D. Holstege did the same in 2016. The longest pastorate for our congregation was that of Rev. Heys, for thirteen years. Perhaps Rev. J. Smidstra, our thirteenth pastor, will break that thirteen-year record, D.V.

Our experience as a congregation has been that “it is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.” (Lam. 3:22-23). Christ continues to be present with the congregation, as is seen by the presence of the three marks of a true church as well as by the marks of Christians (cf. Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

Our membership currently is 67 families. We are the farthest west of all the Michigan PR churches. Although our address is 3641 104th Avenue, Zeeland, MI 49464, we are actually located in *Holland* Township across the street from Zeeland Township. Thus our name is still correct: “First Protestant Reformed Church of Holland.” You are cordially invited to come visit and worship with us!



*Historical information was taken from our 75th Anniversary booklet and several *Acts of Synod*.

Announcements

Teacher needed

The Edmonton PR Christian School is in need of a full-time teacher for the 2021-2022 school year. The school will be starting with grades 1-6 minus grade 5. Please contact Gord Tolsma at gr.tolsma@gmail.com or 780-777-5780 if interested.

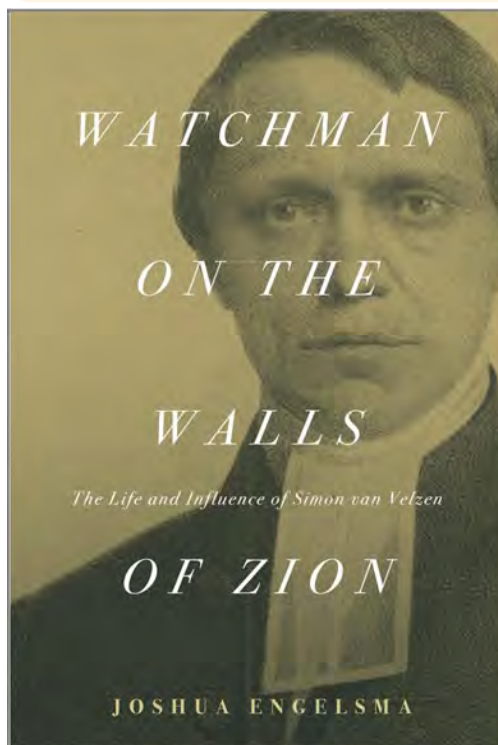
Teacher needed

Covenant Christian High School is accepting applications from members of the Protestant Reformed Churches for teaching positions in the 2021-22 school year. There is a particular need in the areas of English and Mathematics but applications will be accepted from those with secondary certification in other subject areas. We are also in need of a full or part-time English teacher for the second semester of this year (2020-21). Those who are interested in either position are encouraged to contact Mr. Rick Noorman, Administrator at ricknoorman@gmail.com or call 616-453-5048 or Mr. John DeVries, Education Committee at westmichiganrealestate@gmail.com for more information.

Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, January 13, 2021, at 8:00 A.M., in the Grace Protestant Reformed Church, Standale, Michigan. All material for the agenda must be in the hands of the stated clerk by December 14, 2020.

Rev. Clayton Spronk, Stated Clerk



Simon van Velzen was a powerful preacher of the gospel. He was a reformer of the church of Christ in the Netherlands in the Secession of 1834, a seminary professor who influenced hundreds of future Reformed ministers, as well as a faithful husband and devoted father.

Sadly, many Reformed Christians in the twenty-first century have little, if any, idea as to who he is. Where he is remembered, he is often branded as being “unyielding, obstinate, and domineering,” and he is dismissed as being of little significance in the history of the church.

Here’s the biography that corrects the ignorance and misconceptions by setting forth the fascinating life of an influential figure in the history of Christ’s church.

Coming late 2020/early 2021!



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